

JUSTIFICATION  
*and the* GOSPEL

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXTS  
AND CONTROVERSIES

R. MICHAEL ALLEN

**B**  
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For Wesley Hill



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# Introduction

For decades now, the doctrine of justification has been revised, reshaped, and reformed. From ecumenical and exegetical angles, the traditional Protestant consensus has been altered by joint declarations and new perspectives. The new consensus is simple: the classic articulation of justification by faith alone—prized by the Reformation theologians, espoused by their church confessions, and expounded by their dogmatics—will not cut it today. What might be left in its place is up for grabs, with a number of suggestions, but this deconstructive consensus seems to hold.

How extensive is the rethinking? Dawn DeVries describes the state of discussion regarding this doctrine in her entry to the *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*.<sup>1</sup> She notes that four shifts have occurred in historical, exegetical, and ecumenical quarters, requiring massive reformation in the systematic realm. First, Hans Küng’s study of justification in *Barth and Roman Catholicism* has shown that each emphasized one side of a double grace, without denying the importance of the other’s concerns. Second, the so-called new perspective(s) on Paul have redefined the nature of first-century Jewish religion and, thus, the status quo to which Paul polemically responds with his justification doctrine in Galatians and Romans. No longer do we view Paul offering a rebuttal of Pelagian works righteousness with his gospel of grace; now we see him proclaim the correction of an ethnocentric religion by the Abrahamic promise of blessing to the nations. Third, Tuomo Mannermaa and his “Finnish interpretation of Luther” present a new portrait of the first Reformer: one interested just as much in sacramental life and participation in God as in justification and

1. Dawn DeVries, “Justification,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 197–211.

imputation, perhaps even interested in the former matters to the neglect of the latter ones. The double grace described by Küng can be found in the Finnish Luther, with differing emphases apparent in various phases and texts. Fourth, the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* by the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity has suggested that the condemnations of the Reformation era no longer need apply to today's Lutherans and Roman Catholics. Each of these moves—somewhat discrete, yet no doubt mutually reinforcing at times—seems to provide one more nail in the coffin of the Protestant doctrine.

In the face of such seismic shifts in adjoining disciplines, DeVries advocates some major adaptations to the doctrine of justification. Indeed, she offers no criticism of any of these developments; rather, she suggests ways to maneuver in light of them. Her article is a microcosm of the larger debate. Though justification has been a hotbed of ecclesial and scholarly contention in the last few decades, systematic theologians have played a decidedly marginal role in such discussion. Ecumenists and exegetes have dominated the debate with discussion circling around Paul's view of the law or Luther's view of union with Christ. A theological malnourishment has occurred wherein biblical scholars define and debunk certain "Lutheran" or "Protestant" views by means of interpretive argument, all the while engaging very little with broader, systematic implications and connections. One frequently gets the impression that academics trained in their own discipline (e.g., Pauline studies) lack familiarity with Reformation theology, discern textual meaning in biblical texts that seem to conflict with catchphrases or present-day practices rooted in the Protestant tradition, and, therefore, argue against the doctrine of justification *sola fide*. But do they actually find textual support for overturning the authentic teaching of the Reformation or simply some textbook caricature of the same? One wonders.

I offer this book as a missive, an exercise in conceptual, exegetical, and historical reconsideration and, simultaneously, a challenge to existing paradigms and the perspectives of this new consensus. I wish to suggest that several new emphases should be embraced and celebrated, while other revisions ought to be questioned and in fact rejected. As I hope to show, many of the supposed problems with the classic Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone are alleviated when it is viewed in its proper dogmatic location, adjoining other crucial loci (e.g., participation, Christology, sanctification). Many of the blind spots of the contemporary scene are addressed by the full breadth of the gospel, as described by the confessions and dogmatics of the Reformation era. To put it bluntly, I hope to inject a bit of dogmatic reasoning into a debate beholden to contemporary exegetical and ecumenical inclinations.

Dogmatic theology is meant to aid biblical exegesis. At this point, John Webster's reflections on the two forms of "biblical reasoning" prove instructive:

Dogmatic reasoning produces a conceptual representation of what reason has learned from its exegetical following of the scriptural text. In dogmatics, the "matter" of prophetic and apostolic speech is set out in a different idiom, anatomized. Cursive representation leads to conceptual representation, which abstracts from the textual surface by creating generalized or summary concepts and ordering them topically. This makes easier swift, non-laborious and non-repetitive access to the text's matter. But, in doing this, it does not dispense with Scripture, kicking it away as a temporary scaffold; it simply uses a conceptual and topical form to undertake certain tasks with respect to Scripture. These include: seeing Scripture in its full scope as an unfolding of the one divine economy; seeing its interrelations and canonical unity; seeing its proportions. These larger apprehensions of Scripture then inform exegetical reason as it goes about its work on particular parts of Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

Exegetical reasoning—direct reflection on the words of Scripture—is aided by dogmatic reasoning. Indeed, recovery from the disciplinary myopia bred by so much overspecialization and the mass pains of our biblically illiterate culture would be aided more by dogmatic reasoning than might otherwise be the case. As Webster argues, though, this is not to say that some systematic a priori belief (whether a "first principle" or "central dogma") is then teased out and employed as an exegetical trump card. Rather, it is to say that "dogmatics is the schematic and analytical presentation of the matter of the gospel. It is 'systematic,' not in the sense that it offers a rigidly formalized set of deductions from a master concept, but in the low-level sense of gathering together what is dispersed through the temporal economy to which the prophets and apostles direct reason's gaze."<sup>3</sup>

The following chapters address the doctrine of justification *sola fide* from a number of angles: the location of justification within the broader scheme of Christian dogmatics; the relationship of participation and justification to the gospel of Jesus Christ; the coherence and necessity of the Christ's faith; the claim to hold a "christocentric" theology and the issue of imputation; the link between justification, freedom, and obedience; and, finally, the light shed on ecclesiology by this doctrine. The book comes in three parts: a broad consideration of the link between justification and the gospel (the place of the doctrine in Christian theology; justification and participation as ground

2. John Webster, "Biblical Reasoning," *Anglican Theological Journal* 90, no. 4 (2009): 750.

3. *Ibid.*

and goal of the gospel); a look backward at recent debates regarding the work of Christ for us (the faith of Christ; christocentricity and imputation); and a look forward to underappreciated theological vistas involving the way in which the work of Christ for us takes operative form in the work of Christ in us (justification, freedom, and obedience; justification and ecclesiology). As this book focuses on debated points, each time it (re)locates them in wider dogmatic scope and with a fully canonical perspective. It does not address every question or theme related to justification, but it sketches a way forward largely by reexamining the past—both biblical and ecclesial.

PART 1

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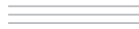
JUSTIFICATION  
AND THE GOSPEL

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# 1



## The Place of Justification in Christian Theology

In this chapter and the next, we will consider a thesis: *the gospel is the glorious news that the God who has life in himself freely shares that life with us and, when we refuse that life in sin, graciously gives us life yet again in Christ. While participation in God is the goal of the gospel, justification is the ground of that sanctifying fellowship.* As we unpack this thesis, we will begin with the twofold subject matter of Christian dogmatics: God and all things in God. Thus, we will trace out the external works of God that are known as the gospel—God’s gracious giving of life to us. We will argue that the doctrine of justification is the key doctrine for expressing certain facets of the gospel, though it does not engage every pertinent question and cannot be called, without qualification, “the article of the standing or falling of the church.” While it is absolutely necessary, it is not altogether sufficient for the Christian confession. We will then consider two ways in which the doctrine of justification does shed light on other doctrines, exercising sway across the dogmatic spectrum (though not independently) by speaking into our doctrine of God and doctrine of humanity.

### Thinking Dogmatically: God and Fellowship with God

The subject matter of Christian dogmatics is the life of God and others in him: *the gospel is the glorious news that the God who has life in himself freely*

*shares that life with us and, when we refuse that life in sin, graciously gives us life yet again in Christ.* As we begin to consider the scope and sequence of the gospel, we do well to describe the very practice of theological knowledge and rational testimony to the gospel.

In the first question of his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas addresses the object of theological knowledge: “All things are dealt with in holy teaching [*sacra doctrina*] in terms of God, either because they are God himself or because they are relative to him as their origin and end.”<sup>1</sup> In his concern to address the question of theology’s subject, Thomas notes a potential objection: “Besides, all matters about which a science reaches settled conclusions enter into its subject. Now sacred Scripture goes as far about many things other than God, for instance about creatures and human conduct. Therefore its subject is not purely God.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Thomas notes the way other medieval theologians speak of the subject matters of theology: of reality and its symbols (Augustine, Lombard), the works of redemption (Hugh of St. Victor), or Christ and his body (Robert Kilwardy and others). He does not dismiss the topics they raise as if they were unfitting for theological reflection, though he locates them as always subordinate to God: “All these indeed are dwelt on by this science, yet as held in their relationship to God.” Later: “All other things that are settled in Holy Scripture are embraced in God, not that they are parts of him—such as essential components or accidents—but because they are somehow related to him.”<sup>3</sup> Other things exist not in themselves, but in God’s power and by his will. Other things prosper and flourish not by their own mettle, but by the provision and grace—the life-giving promise—of the triune God. Indeed, this is the promised end of the gospel: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Rev. 21:3). Human life exists for and is defined by fellowship with this living One.

This gospel is good news precisely because it is a promise of life from one who has life in himself. Pledges are only as good as their author. Indeed, the apostle Paul shows concern for this question in his writing to the Roman Christians. After recounting the great divine promises of assurance in Romans 8:31–39, he then notes that a doubt may arise in his audience’s mind. They could be remarkably enthused by the pledges given there—who would not be?—and yet wonder if God is able and/or willing to come through on these promises. After all, God promised great things to Israel and seems not to have

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Thomas Gilby (London: Blackfriars, 1963), 1a.1.7, reply.

2. *Ibid.*, obj. 2.

3. *Ibid.*, ad 2.



kept his word. He had pledged that they would be his people, and yet, most recently, the vast majority of Israelites had rejected the Messiah. Thus, Paul must launch into a discussion of the truthfulness and trustworthiness of God's Word (e.g., Rom. 9:6). Paul's reflection on the election of God and the story of Israel demonstrates the importance of the doctrine of God for the gospel to be *good* news (see Rom. 9–11). The reliability of one's word matters a great deal for those who would bank on it. The God of the gospel is the one of whom it is said, "For from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom. 11:36). God's Word called the world into being from nothing and creates new life just the same. It makes all the sense in the world to cast our cares upon him.

The Gospel according to John presents a similar concern for the theological basis of the gospel itself, rooting the incarnational mystery (John 1:14: "the Word became flesh") in the story of the God who was alive and gave life to all things (see John 1:1–4). Repeatedly, the Gospel points backward to the full life from which the Word comes to give life; the Prologue accents this point lest the reader miss it. Indeed, knowing the fullness of God generates faith in his gospel. For this very reason, Thomas argued that knowledge of the Trinity was important for Christians.

The knowledge of the divine persons was necessary to us on two grounds. The first is to enable us to think rightly on the subject of the creation of things. For by maintaining that God made everything through his Word we avoid the error of those who held that God's nature necessarily compelled him to create things. By affirming that there is in him the procession of Love, we show that he made creatures, not because he needed them nor because of any reason outside him, but from Love of his own goodness. . . . The second reason, and the principal one, is to give us a true notion of the salvation of mankind, a salvation accomplished by the Son who became flesh and by the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

Knowing the self-sufficiency of the triune life demonstrates the divine freedom (from external need or compulsion) and, thus, the gratuity of God's external works, both creation and new creation. More recently, John Webster has focused upon the importance not only of knowing the trinity of God but also of grasping the aseity of God as the necessary backdrop and launching pad of God's gospel.<sup>5</sup> In an era dominated by historicist approaches to

4. *Ibid.*, 1a.32.1, ad 3.

5. On the importance of an operative doctrine of God for understanding creation, see John Webster, "Trinity and Creation," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 1 (2010): 4–19. On the link between an operative doctrine of God and the gospel, see Webster, "'It Was the Will of the Lord to Bruise Him': Soteriology and the Doctrine of God," in *God without Measure: Essays in Christian Doctrine* (London: T&T Clark, forthcoming). On the doctrine

God, reflection upon God's life in himself has not been given great prestige in contemporary theology. Such reflections upon the "immanent Trinity"—that is, God's life in himself—are viewed suspiciously as being prone to speculation that is separated from or opposed to God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. Yet careful consideration of the biblical witness points us back behind the divine economy to its roots in God's eternal life in himself, from which his movement toward us, in creation and new creation, is generated.<sup>6</sup> It is thus decidedly unhistorical to limit our theological reflections to the events experienced by the prophets and apostles in the name of historical concern and, perhaps, a christocentric epistemology, precisely because Jesus and his ambassadors constantly point backward to the one who commissioned and sent them (see, e.g., John 5:19, 26, 30).<sup>7</sup> Discerning the eternal roots of the gospel is essential to maintaining the genuine gratuity and the unimpeachable reliability of that same news. And this is crucial for understanding the place of justification in Christian theology. Justification describes a crucial event in the divine economy. Yet it remains an event in the history of God's external works, which range from creation to consummation.

John Webster has raised the question of distorting the doctrine of justification by asserting that it is the "ruler and judge over all other Christian doctrines."<sup>8</sup> As I have described above, Webster argues that the gospel speaks of the God who has life in himself and then gives that life to others. In other words, there are two parts to Christian doctrine—God and the works of God—of which it can truly be said that "there is only one Christian doctrine, the doctrine of the triune God," for this God does these things.<sup>9</sup> What, then, of the gospel and, specifically, the doctrine of justification? Webster argues that there are two ways in which they are made relative.<sup>10</sup> First, all the works

of aseity, strictly speaking, see Webster, "Life in and of Himself: On God's Aseity," in *God without Measure*.

6. This movement behind the divine economy is not a speculation upon the hidden God, precisely inasmuch as it is not only impelled but is also guided by Holy Scripture, itself a gift in the divine economy.

7. In chap. 3 I will argue that the biblical portrayal of the Christ's faith, exercised by the incarnate Son during his particular sojourn upon the earth, flowed out of his eternal relationship to his heavenly Father (most poignantly described as his eternal generation). Scholastic theologians would say here that the external works of God are patterned after and express the inner works of God—this maxim simply serves to unpack the claim that Jesus really is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15) and that, though "no one has ever seen God," Jesus really "has made him known" (John 1:18).

8. John Webster, "*Rector et iudex super omnia genera doctrinarum?* The Place of the Doctrine of Justification," in *What Is Justification About? Reformed Contributions to an Ecumenical Theme*, ed. Michael Weinrich and John P. Burgess (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 35–56.

9. *Ibid.*, 37.

10. *Ibid.*, 39–42.

of God are relative and subordinate to the being of God—there was a time when he, and he alone, was; all else flows out of this triune fullness. Second, the works of God include creation and providence, as well as the gospel and justification. In other words, soteriology is not the sole external work of God.

We could add a still further relativization: within the work of salvation, justification is not the only divine act. The God who declares the ungodly righteous also makes them holy and upright. The God who suffers in our place also sanctifies our persons. The Bible is not stingy in its description of God's saving work: justification is a glorious part of this jewel, but it is a many-splendored beauty that exceeds God's justifying work alone.

In light of these reflections regarding the nature of theology's object and the scope of the gospel, then, we can ask what use might be made of some Protestant insistences that justification by faith alone is the cardinal or primary piece of Christian doctrine. Among a number of contemporary Lutheran theologians, and especially in the American movement known as Radical Lutheranism, justification becomes not only a doctrine but also a principle and maxim. We will consider three such approaches, two European Lutherans (Eberhard Jüngel and Oswald Bayer) and one Radical Lutheran (Mark Mattes). For example, Jüngel argues,

In the justification article all these statements come to a head. The decision is made here first of all as to who this God is, and what it really means to be creatively active. Next, it says what it means to die for others and to bring forth new life in the midst of death: a life that imparts itself through the power of the Spirit to our passing world in such a way that a new community arises—the Christian church. The justification article brings out emphatically the truth of the relationship between God and people and in so doing the correct understanding of God's divinity and our humanity. And since the Christian church draws its life from the relationship between God and people, and only from that relationship, the justification article is the one article by which the church stands and without which it falls. So every other truth of the faith must be weighed and judged by that article.<sup>11</sup>

What does Jüngel mean? “It is only when explained by means of that doctrine [of justification] that Christology becomes a materially appropriate Christology at all.”<sup>12</sup> Jüngel's concern is that justification alone unfolds the name of Jesus in a specifically Christian way. Just as ancient theologians, in the courses charted by Arius and others, had to insist that there were un-Christian

11. Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, trans. Jeffrey Cayzer (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 16.

12. *Ibid.*, 29.

ways of talking about Jesus, so Jüngel suggests that any Christology that does not describe the justification of the ungodly misses the mark in testifying well of Jesus. As he argues later, the *sola gratia* simply unfolds the *solus Christus* in authentic fashion.<sup>13</sup> But it is not merely authentic; it is autocratic: justification is “the hermeneutical category of theology,” inasmuch as it brings all doctrine into the realm of the legal dispute.<sup>14</sup> Jüngel suggests that thereby justification proves its mettle and its primacy—but he has yet to argue for the superiority of the legal metaphor. And many who have gone through judicial proceedings in various facets of life would consider them barely tolerable, much less good, and only good on the basis of instrumental value in making other things possible. Surely a claim that the legal dispute is lord and ruler of doctrine requires argument.<sup>15</sup>

Bayer’s approach is particularly notable when it comes to this issue. He argues that there is real breadth to the doctrine of justification in Martin Luther’s theology, inasmuch as it affects social and anthropological reflections. “Justification is not a separate topic apart from which still other topics could be discussed. Justification is the starting point for all theology and it affects every other topic.”<sup>16</sup> Bayer argues that justification uniquely identifies humanity as being curved outward, defined by that which is outside of it rather than internal to it or fashioned by it. Thus it has implications for the self (not self-created or even self-shaped, but given being and gratuitously created) and for society (not the project of human progress or the occasion for anthropological achievement). In every aspect humanity is marked by gift: justification offers the fundamental articulation of life by gift.

Bayer agrees with Luther, then, about the subject matter of theology. In his comments on Psalm 51, Luther says: “The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and Savior of man the sinner. Whatever is asked or discussed in theology outside this subject,

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13. *Ibid.*, 174.

14. *Ibid.*, 47, 48. Surely Jüngel’s suggestion at this point draws on the argument of Karl Barth: “The doctrine of justification not only narrates but explains this history. It is the attempt to see and understand in its positive sense the sentence of God which is executed in His judgment and revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (*Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4/1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley [London: T&T Clark, 1956], 516).

15. Oswald Bayer has, in many ways, attempted to rethink justification in a creational and not strictly legal fashion. But this approach raises its own questions, including the question of why such matters as anthropology should be viewed exclusively under the heading of justification, since the term is inherently legal.

16. Oswald Bayer, “Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology,” in *Justification Is for Preaching: Essays by Oswald Bayer, Gerhard O. Forde, and Others*, ed. Virgil Thompson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 32.

is error and poison.”<sup>17</sup> It is clear that Bayer intends the doctrine of justification to identify the word of law and the promise of gospel, both spoken in divine-human exchange. Theology reflects on that conversation: confession of sin, assurance of pardon. God speaks only these two words; therefore, the doctrine of justification is the subject matter of theology. Thus, Bayer says that justification is not only the “starting point” but also “the basis, boundary, and the subject matter of theology.”<sup>18</sup>

Mattes has gone so far as to suggest that justification must be the criterion for every theological statement, or else one has fallen into system-building and the theology of glory. He clearly worries that theological reflection will easily follow the presuppositions of the sinner; only justification puts the sinner on his heels and hallows the Word of God. Justification serves as a second-order epistemic principle, shaping every statement made by Christians in their first-order claims (their prayer and praise, worship and witness). Like Jüngel and Bayer, Mattes clearly thinks the hiddenness of God is a danger to any approach that does not treat justification as a sieve for theological speculation.

Webster catalogs a number of similar references, all of which try in some way to express the classic affirmation of many Protestants that justification is the article by which the church stands or falls (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*).<sup>19</sup> Webster finds these varying approaches wanting, inasmuch as “it is simply not possible to maintain the unqualified claim that of itself justification suffices to answer the questions: ‘Who or what is a really divine God? Who or what is a really human being?’”<sup>20</sup>

Now three options are before us: (1) justification is the central doctrine and principle by which all other doctrines are judged; (2) justification is simply one among many doctrines and holds no privileged place in the dogmatic corpus; or (3) justification is the central doctrine and principle in addressing certain questions and confessing particular aspects of the gospel, though it is not meant to answer every question and must be located in a wider analysis of God and his gospel.

The first option cannot be maintained in its strict form. Justification requires other doctrines to make any sense. In his suggestion, Webster goes on

17. Martin Luther, “Psalm 51,” in *Selections from the Psalms I*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther’s Works 12 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955), 311, quoted in Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 37n21. See also Gerhard Ebeling, “*Cognitio Dei et hominis*,” in *Lutherstudien Band I* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1971), 221–72.

18. Bayer, “Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology,” 32, 48.

19. For reflection along these lines, see the various studies of Jüngel, Pannenberg, Moltmann, Jenson, and Bayer in Mark C. Mattes, *The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology*, Lutheran Quarterly Books (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

20. Webster, “*Rector et iudex super omnia genera doctrinarum?*,” 49.

to describe a host of crucial tenets related to, though not fully described by, justification: God, divine-human fellowship, law, sin, the incarnation, and the gospel declaration of restored fellowship in Christ. While Webster can look back on this dogmatics in brief as a gloss on Psalm 11:7—“the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face”—he shows that further canonical reflection is required to flesh out this text so that it is good news. Neither sin nor the incarnation is mentioned in Psalm 11:7, though both, of course, cohere beautifully with the premise and the promise of the text. Similarly, the declaration that God justifies the ungodly requires numerous other articles to make sense.

Bayer does demonstrate that justification affects other doctrines. But demonstrating this point is distinct from showing that no other doctrine does so as well or, at least, that justification does so in a manner superior to or privileged before all others. And the claim that justification is “the basis and the boundary of theology” requires that precisely that comparative claim be made. Bayer begins his essay on justification by saying that “justification is not a separate topic apart from which still other topics could be discussed. Justification is the starting point for all theology and it affects every other topic.”<sup>21</sup> But we must note that he has juxtaposed two options that allow for an excluded middle. He wants to oppose the notion that justification is unattached and separated from other doctrines. Yet his counterclaim is not merely that justification is attached to other doctrines and that “it affects every other topic”; rather, he goes still further to suggest that “justification is the starting point for all theology”—that is, it has some peculiar primacy across the theological board. Bayer is not only claiming that it has systemic import and universal effect but also that it has hermeneutical primacy in theology. Justification is the ruler of all other doctrines.

But this is precisely what Bayer never argues. His essay is a wonderful demonstration of glorious success alongside abject failure. In what he does, he succeeds wildly, demonstrating the social and personal implications of justification. Yet in what he says he will do, not only does he fail, but he offers no argument whatsoever. The reader has much to be grateful for at the end of the day but can only say that the article is poorly titled and headed by an inaccurate thesis statement. If it made a more modest claim, its true brilliance would be seen.

Building on the work of Jüngel and especially Bayer, Mattes complicates matters and confuses the project of system-building with the error of deflating the gospel proclamation of the church. In his study of contemporary approaches to justification, he finds Jüngel, Pannenberg, Moltmann, and Jenson

21. Bayer, “Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology,” 32.

all guilty of toning down the promise of Jesus. “Theologically speaking, the greatest peril of the university, with all its various disciplines, is the attempt to establish—by whatever means—an encyclopedic ‘God’s eye’ view of reality, walking by sight, not by faith.”<sup>22</sup> But this assessment mixes matters that must be kept distinct. Why must efforts at discerning the full scope of God’s reality be encyclopedically declared to be “walking by sight, not by faith”? That there is a natural theology—what Luther would rightly call a “theology of glory”—cannot be denied. Nor can it be denied that much of the contemporary university’s profile lends itself to human attempts to chart the better course of wisdom apart from the killing and making alive that the gospel brings by God’s grace. Yet there is surely no reason to employ the bombastic statement that justification is the criterion of all theological knowledge to make the claim that all theological knowledge must speak of the crucified, justifying Christ given for sinners. As with Jüngel and Bayer, Mattes can show that justification is necessary as a criterion for theology; unfortunately, he also suggests that it is a sufficient criterion. The two are not the same thing. Against these Lutherans, and even against similar claims made by Calvin himself, we must say that justification is not the sole ruler of Christian doctrine.<sup>23</sup>

However, the second option proves of no more use than the first. It simply will not do to suggest, as some have, that justification is merely one among many such images employed to talk of God’s life with us or of the divine economy. Justification does strike a spiritual nerve and serve to testify to a leading edge of the gospel account. Furthermore, when it is articulated in the form of imputation, it reminds us that God in Christ assumes our place and we in him enjoy all spiritual blessings. That notion of exchange or interchange is pivotal to the exposition of God’s being and our own. While other biblical idioms may suggest it (e.g., sacrifice or penal substitution), justification has served historically to make this crucial point.<sup>24</sup> Jüngel, Mattes, and especially

22. Mattes, *Role of Justification*, 179.

23. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.11.1 (where Calvin says this is the “main hinge on which religion turns”).

24. In Roman Catholic theology, the notion of “initial justification” would serve this role (as in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae.114.5, reply, *ad* 1). For reflections on the distinction between this initial dispositional movement of God and the ongoing transformative work of God in justification (according to the Council of Trent), see Bruce D. Marshall, “*Beatus vir*: Aquinas, Romans 4, and the Role of ‘Reckoning’ in Justification,” in *Reading Romans with St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Matthew Levering and Michael Dauphinais (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 216–37; and the account of Thomas’s doctrine of justification as involving (1) forgiveness, (2) sanctifying grace, and (3) guidance for life, found in Charles Raith II, “Aquinas and Calvin on Romans: Theological Exegesis and Ecumenical Theology” (PhD diss., Ave Maria University, 2010), 52–94.



Bayer are surely right to insist that the doctrine of justification plays a cardinal role in pointing to the axiomatic status of the first commandment.<sup>25</sup> Whether individual or social, human being is the result of gift; furthermore, the divine character is marked by the self-sacrificial love displayed in the gospel story: God is a gospeling sort of being. Thus, we cannot treat justification as simply one doctrine, untethered or disconnected from others.

While justification is relativized by the other ways in which God's work of salvation is described, it does hold a systematic place that shapes other doctrines. As justification is further relativized by the other works of God (for example, creation and providence), we see that it nonetheless portrays a divinely determined focal point of the whole divine economy. And as justification is still further relativized by the doctrine of God's own life, we continue to see that the very God who has life in himself freely wills to share that life with others, even the ungodly whom he will justify in Christ. Understanding any of these other doctrines, then, cannot be done in a specifically Christian way apart from the confession that the justification of the ungodly is an essential ingredient within the whole. In other words, this is a claim that justification is not merely a discrete component of the whole, but that it is a constituent aspect of the whole.

Here it is crucial to highlight that Mattes and these Lutherans have not framed the debate well. Their proposal suggests either that justification of the ungodly serves as one doctrine, hermetically sealed off from all others, or that it is the hub that holds together all others and puts them in their place.<sup>26</sup> Notice the metaphors used: the first option entails no systematic effect of justification on other doctrines, while the second possibility suggests, by definition, that justification is *the* center of Christian teaching—a wheel only having one hub. In the foreword to Mattes's book, Klaus Schwarzwaller presents precisely this dichotomy. One can either promote something as “the major article” or demote what is essential. “So the question here is whether or not the faith itself is at stake with one article among others. If it is, this article is obviously much more than one article among others. In this case, the ‘article,’ as it were, stands for the creed.”<sup>27</sup> This kind of juxtaposition of extremes leads Mattes to suggest that the necessity of the doctrine of justification intrinsically requires its sufficiency for theology. At times the way he uses the language of this doc-

25. See Mattes, *Role of Justification*, 182. For historical approaches that emphasize the axiomatic nature of the first commandment, see Martin Luther, “Treatise on Good Works (1520),” in *The Christian in Society I*, ed. James Atkinson, Luther's Works 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 15–114; and Karl Barth, “The First Commandment as a Theological Axiom,” in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, ed. H. Martin Rumscheidt (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1986), 63–78.

26. See Mattes, *Role of Justification*, 4, 10.

27. Klaus Schwarzwaller, foreword to *ibid.*, viii.



trine as a *discrimen* suggests that there might be an opening to consider it a hermeneutical grid for doctrine writ large, though amid others. Yet he continues to refer to it as “the” *discrimen*.<sup>28</sup> In their arguments for the sufficiency of this doctrine as the *discrimen* or “center and boundary” of all theology, Mattes and Jüngel continue to cite Luther.<sup>29</sup> Yet all the quotations from the great preacher point to the doctrine’s necessity, not its sufficiency as a hermeneutical filter for theological analysis. For their claims to be grounded, they would not need to prove that Luther believes justification is the only doctrine, but they would need him to say that it is the only doctrine that serves as a *discrimen*—that is, a center, basis, or boundary. While Luther clearly believes it does serve in such ways, and while he does refer to it as a primary doctrine, he does not speak of it as the only such doctrine. Luther knew that the creed says more than this, even though it must speak this word of “forgiveness of sins.”

In light of the argument thus far, then, the third approach must be followed: justification is the central doctrine and theological rule with respect to particular theological questions. In saying this, of course, we celebrate the doctrine of justification in its particular place (and nowhere else). It does not answer every question. For example, one would be hard pressed to begin with the statement “God justifies the ungodly” and go on to unpack a fully trinitarian theology or a doctrine of creation. Yet some essential questions—the character of God’s love, the nature of the divine-human fellowship, the stance of the creature before God, and many more—are answered most fully in God’s justifying word.<sup>30</sup> Where it speaks, it does so essentially and beautifully. But we would be asking too much to expect it to address our every need or whim. In fact, to do so would be to turn from dependence on God and his address and instead to demand doctrines that say what we wish and speak to whatever we might desire.

In this vein, Webster helps point to this crucial role for justification. Even as he seeks to relativize the doctrine, he does affirm that “among these different articulations of God’s saving work, the idiom of justification has an indispensable place for at least four reasons.”

1. “Justification is a primary theme in some of the key texts of one of the major New Testament witnesses; an ‘apostolic’ soteriology loses its claim to the title if it diminishes the importance of *dikaïosunē theou*.”

28. Mattes, *Role of Justification*, 11.

29. *Ibid.*, 5–6nn8–9; Jüngel, *Justification*, 17n4, 18n6. For language of justification as the “center and boundary,” see Ernst Wolf, “Die Rechtfertigungslehre als Mitte und Grenze reformatorischer Theologie,” in *Peregrinatio*, vol. 2, *Studien zur reformatorischen Theologie, zum Kirchenrecht und zur Sozialethik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1965), 11–21.

30. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4/1, 520–21.

2. “Justification is inseparable from many other themes in the economy of salvation (covenant, sin, law, the death and resurrection of the Son, and God’s holiness and the sanctification of the people of God) and so has greater scope than more narrowly focused concepts such as ransom or penal substitution.”
3. “The idiom of justification lays particular emphasis upon salvation as historical encounter.”
4. “Justification—especially a radical notion of *iustitia imputata*—is especially suited to convey the anthropological entailments of the sheer gratuity of God’s work. Again, as Jüngel puts it, ‘The *articulus iustificationis* reminds us that God’s grace is the fundamental and all-determining dimension of human life.’”<sup>31</sup>

I would add a fifth point—related to Webster’s fourth point—regarding the importance of justification: justification, especially as understood via imputation, is particularly fit to convey the theological entailments of the sheer gratuity of God’s work. God truly is—all the way down in the triune life—a God of glorious grace. Hence, writing to the Ephesians, Paul celebrates the gospel not merely as revelation of human flourishing but also as a manifestation of the divine fullness (Eph. 1:23). Because the gospel shows us who God is, Paul announces repeatedly that it is “to the praise of his glory” (1:12; cf. 1:6, 14). We will come back to this link below (under the heading “Justification and the God of the Gospel”).

I also wish to expand Webster’s second point in such a way that even his first point must be extended. Justification as a dogmatic idiom serves to gather together and make sense of a host of biblical terms and concepts, but Webster does not mention perhaps the most crucial: namely, sacrifice. This conceptual relationship will be discussed in chapter 2. It and other terminologies (ranging from “salvation” to “reconciliation” or “making peace”) describe the basis of our acceptance before God, while we were yet sinners. This is standard and necessary fare in good dogmatics. Our theological terminology is meant to help us read biblical language well, though it need not simply stick with or restrict itself to the biblical terms as such.<sup>32</sup> The same kind of synthetic work that led to the doctrine of the Trinity in the fourth century took shape in later thinking regarding the doctrine of justification in the sixteenth and later centuries: a host of texts, employing various biblical concepts, were found to express certain

31. Webster, “*Rector et iudex super omnia genera doctrinarum?*,” 46–47.

32. On the nature of biblical and dogmatic language, see the discussion in chap. 2 under the heading “The Forensic Entryway of the Gospel” as well as Michael Allen and Daniel J. Treier, “Dogmatic Theology and Biblical Perspectives on Justification: A Reply to Leithart,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 70, no. 1 (2008): 105–10.

unified judgments of immense importance. These texts ranged from Romans 3 to Exodus 12, from Genesis 22 to Galatians 2, from Ephesians 1 to Hebrews 8. Thus, the biblical idioms that pour into our doctrine of justification extend far beyond those mentioned by Webster, and, therefore, the range of prophetic and apostolic texts that is tied to this doctrine is far greater than some select portion of the Pauline corpus.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the sacrificial imagery of the Old Testament alone proves of immense worth in teasing out a doctrine of justification, and the Epistle to the Hebrews reflects on this massive biblical witness in light of the Christ event in a way that, though it does not employ the idiom of justification, should inform our theological reflection on the doctrine of justification.

Certain key tenets of soteriology and of the life of the Trinity are especially manifest by way of the idiom of justification. It accents the gratuity of God's life-giving work and the *ek*-centric nature of human existence in Christ. Yet it does not say everything we are called to confess. Justification says little of the goal of the gospel.<sup>34</sup> We must turn elsewhere to speak of that. In chapter 2, we will see that the notion of participation in God proves essential at just this point (albeit rightly rendered as covenant fellowship rather than deification). Indeed, Paul does exactly this at the conclusion of his discussion of justification in his Epistle to the Romans: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (5:1–2). Justification brings peace and grants access, but it is the glory of God that is the hope of the Christian. Thus, Paul declares the glorious news that the gospel is based on a justifying word of Christ, but he simultaneously points to its participatory *telos*, the hope that we shall behold the glory of God. That justification does not tell us every aspect of the gospel could be further accentuated by the subsequent statement that, moreover, it does not say everything about God (who not only makes all things new in Christ but also first made them in creation and, in both cases, does so for the purposes of both reconciliation and glorification).

While justification does not say everything, it does say certain essential things. Dogmatics must say this and honor this function of justification, or else

33. Thomas Aquinas argues for such practice, for example, in his comments on Eph. 2:8, where he discusses Paul's phrase that "to be saved is the same as to be justified" (*Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Matthew Lamb, Aquinas Scripture Commentaries 2 [Albany, NY: Magi, 1966], chap. 2, lect. 3, 95; cf. Daniel Keating, "Justification, Sanctification, and Divinization in Thomas Aquinas," in *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating, and John Yocum [London: T&T Clark, 2004], 142).

34. It does tell us that the goal is sure and fixed: in Christ, not in and of ourselves. Thus it is not completely silent regarding the end of the gospel. But, nonetheless, it does not itself tell us of the beatific vision, the presence of God, the resurrection of the body, the renewal of the kingdom, etc.

it risks being incapable of following the apostle Paul's writing to the Galatian Christians. As Paul addresses the churches of Galatia, he quickly expresses to them that he is "astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" (Gal. 1:6). The pedigree or profile of a teacher matters not. Even if an apostle or angel from heaven were to present a different gospel, it must be rejected (1:8–9). But, apparently, this rejection has not happened among the Galatians. Instead, they had embraced the "gospel of Christ" and have since been troubled by those who distort that message (1:7).

Nowhere else in all his writings does the apostle speak with such stridency. In fact, this point was worth public confrontation with Peter in Antioch, when Paul observed that Peter, the Jews there, and even Barnabas refused to enjoy table fellowship with their gentile brothers and sisters in Christ. "I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14). An ethical and ecclesial misstep is the presenting issue, to be sure, but Paul notes that this is a gospel concern. As he seeks to explain the roots of this issue, he immediately turns to the doctrine of justification: "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (vv. 15–16). It is precisely this contrast—between justification "by works of the law" or "through faith in Jesus Christ"—that Paul calls an astonishing "turning to a different gospel" (1:6).

Galatians surely points us to the existential energy tethered to the doctrine of justification. It has an intimate relationship to the assurance of the Christian. Herman Bavinck locates the issue this way: "What is the way that leads to communion with God, to true religion, to salvation and eternal life: God's grace or human merit, his forgiveness or our works, gospel or law, the covenant of grace or the covenant of works? If it is the latter, if our work, our virtue, our sanctification is primary, then the believers' consolation ends, and they remain in doubt and uncertainty to their last breath."<sup>35</sup>

Galatians, too, highlights the harrowing result of relying not solely on Christ but also on one's own work or fitness. Heinrich Bullinger notes that though the Galatians "still confessed the name of Christ," they were "said to have turned away from him." How could this be so? "It is those who do not acknowledge the benefit of his grace or who do not attribute all the glory to him who are said to have turned away from him."<sup>36</sup> Paul ruminates over the

35. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 205.

36. Heinrich Bullinger, *Commentary on Paul's Epistles*, on Gal. 1:6, quoted in Gerald Bray, ed., *Galatians and Ephesians*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 23–24.

pathway to righteousness: a gift in Christ rather than a gain through law. So, he says, “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose” (Gal. 2:21). As he returns to his stinging personal rebuke of the Galatians, he likens the instrument of faith to “hearing,” a totally receptive activity over against the approach of the “works of the law” (3:2, 5).<sup>37</sup>

The pathway of “works of the law” fails inasmuch as it cannot be fulfilled. Paul is concerned about their “advantage” and suggests that exclusive religious rites (the pathway of “works of the law”) lead to destruction. Why? “I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law” (Gal. 5:3). Such persons are described in brutal fashion: “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace” (v. 4). While the Judaizers certainly were not denying any role for Christ in salvation, they were practically (if not also principally) dismissing his sufficiency for justification. Luther and Calvin remind us—later readers of this epistle—that all other attempts at justification by religion are sure to be far worse, inasmuch as the Judaizing approach is the best possible form of “works of the law”: at least it suggests that works once commanded by God are required, whereas later laws are merely human proposals (e.g., late medieval Roman sacramental practice or, we might add, the moral projects of fundamentalist withdrawal or modern liberal inclusion, both of which can be equally enslaving).<sup>38</sup> The Reformers saw the Epistle to the Galatians not as denying the place of the law (or the divine commandments as such) for the Christian, but as repudiating any suggestion that they are essential for being in Christ and enjoying peace with God.<sup>39</sup> Against this particular form of law, Luther would repeatedly speak of the need to “kick it out of the conscience.”<sup>40</sup>

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37. J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 33a (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 281–89.

38. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), *Chapters 1–4*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther’s Works 26 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 23 (1:7), 34 (1:14), 36–37 (1:15–17), 42–43 (2:1), 46 (2:3), 144–45 (3:10), 285 (4:27), 289 (4:27); cf. John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles 1–13*, ed. David W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance, trans. John W. Fraser and W. G. J. McDonald, Calvin’s Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 170. Calvin’s and Luther’s comments are clearly contrary to Douglas Campbell’s claims that “justification theory” requires an extreme legalism ignorant of historical differences between late medieval Roman Catholic religion and the first-century experience of the Pharisees and Judaizers (*The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 121).

39. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), *Chapters 1–4*, 45–46 (2:3).

40. *Ibid.*, 24 (1:7); see also Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), *Chapters 5–6* (1519), ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther’s Works 27 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 4 (5:1), 15 (5:3). See similar comments in Luther, *Selections from the Psalms 1*, 27–28 (2:5).

Galatians does not merely point to justification's link to assurance but also reminds us that the doctrine is designed for doxology.<sup>41</sup> The God who justifies is the God who will be boasted in fully. Bavinck is suggestive here as well in showing the results of forgetting this truth: "If our work, our virtue, our sanctification is primary . . . then Christ is violated in his unique, all-encompassing, and all-sufficient mediatorial office, and he himself is put on a level with other humans, with ourselves. Then God is robbed of his honor, for if humans are justified on the basis of their works, they have reason to boast of themselves and are, partly or totally, the craftsmen of their own salvation."<sup>42</sup>

Christ is relativized—God is minimized. To misread or misapply justification in Christ is not primarily to mistake our existence (though it is that); it is fundamentally to mischaracterize the God of the gospel. And Galatians makes precisely this point in its conclusion: when drawing together all that he has celebrated and commanded, Paul says that he wishes only to boast in his crucified Lord (6:14). Mattes makes the point in perceptive fashion: "From the perspective of Reformation theology, the quarrel about the gospel's distinctiveness is less a dispute about how to secure anxious consciences and more a matter of how to honor God properly. Can *more than* faith be offered by humans to give God the worship that is God's due?"<sup>43</sup>

Galatians is also appropriate to mention at this point, because in the book Paul is addressing a polemical situation. In the modern era, Karl Barth has noted that talk of justification as *the* word of the gospel has occurred rightly in certain times. He lists four such occasions: Augustine's opposition to the Pelagians, Luther's attack on the sacramental practice of the late medieval Roman Church, the early nineteenth-century rejection of a secularized version of salvation in Enlightenment thinking, and in Barth's own day, he proposes, when "humanistic religiosity" threatens in various ways. Against each ideology, the justification of the ungodly is a "fully developed weapon with which to meet all these things." However, Barth suggests a sense of proportion and order: "In the Church of Jesus Christ this doctrine has not always been *the* Word of the Gospel, and it would be an act of narrowing and unjust exclusiveness to proclaim and treat it as such."<sup>44</sup> While "there never was and there never can be any true Christian Church without the doctrine of justification," this is not the same as saying that it is always the pressing matter of the moment.

41. G. C. Berkouwer wisely points to the links between *sola fide* and *solī Deo Gloria* (*Faith and Justification*, trans. Lewis B. Smedes, Studies in Dogmatics [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954], 55–57).

42. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:205.

43. Mattes, *Role of Justification*, 13.

44. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4/1, 523.

Suggestions that one must be all in or completely out present a false middle and fail to recognize the unique glory of this doctrine. “It has its own dignity and necessity to which we do more and not less justice if we do not ascribe to it a totalitarian claim which is not proper to it, or allow all other questions to culminate or merge into it, or reject them altogether with an appeal to it, but if we accept it with all its limitations as this problem and try to answer it as such.”<sup>45</sup> As in Paul’s presentation of it in Galatians, Barth sees the doctrine as of the essence of the gospel without calling it the entirety of the gospel: “The problem of justification does not need artificially to be absolutised and given a monopoly.”<sup>46</sup>

Justification serves as Christian language in three forms. In first-order discourse of praise and proclamation, we speak of God’s justifying the ungodly: we thank him for it, we present this good news to others, and we have the joy of hearing these words of assurance declared to those who confess their sin and need. In second-order discourse of Christian doctrine, we analytically reflect upon the biblical truth that God does justify the ungodly. Yet as we follow the witness of Scripture, we find that justification also functions in third-order discourse by shaping our thinking about theological thinking. Justification affects our theology proper and our anthropology; thus, it affects our approach to theology itself, that is, to theological method.<sup>47</sup>

We now turn to ways that it functions in this third level, that is, as a theological criterion giving shape and structure to other doctrines. We will consider two such instances in the remainder of this chapter before returning to some more extended case studies in the third part of this book. First, we will consider the way the justification of the ungodly informs our understanding of the character of God. Second, we will reflect on the anthropological implications of the divine justification in Christ alone. This anthropological reflection will be fairly brief, inasmuch as the last two chapters of the book extend it in the direction of ethics and ecclesiology. In these case studies, I do not argue that justification is a sufficient criterion for thinking well about God and humanity, but we do see that it is a necessary criterion for any such attempt to do theological reflection about the God of the Christian confession, that is, the God of the gospel. We will tease out some of those systematic implications here before they are extended in part 3.

45. *Ibid.*, 528.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Mattes refers to this methodological work as “second order” precisely because he mixes the work of theology and proclamation. However, a distinction between first- and second-order discourse is essential, if one is to preserve the difference between the performative statements of Christian liturgy and witness and the theological analysis rendered by the creeds, confessions, and dogmatic tradition of the church.



## Justification and the God of the Gospel

Jesus Christ truly reveals God. As John the Evangelist tells us, “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:18). This revelation of the divine mystery occurs in the Word becoming flesh. With these verses in mind, Bernard of Clairvaux proclaims,

Once God was incomprehensible and inaccessible, invisible and entirely unthinkable. But now he wanted to be seen, he wanted to be understood, he wanted to be known. How was this done, you ask? God lay in a manger and lay on the Virgin’s breast. He preached on a mountain, prayed through the night, and hung on a cross. He lay pale in death, was free among the dead, and was master of hell. He rose on the third day, showed the apostles the signs of victory where nails once were, and ascended before their eyes to the inner recesses of heaven. . . . When I think on any of these things, I am thinking of God, and in all these things he is now my God.<sup>48</sup>

The works of God genuinely do show forth the character of God. The Psalms often recount the great and mighty deeds of the Lord, repeatedly affirming the divine attributes as expressions of the one who works these wonders in our midst (Ps. 145:4–6, 10, 12, 17).<sup>49</sup> With these biblical emphases in mind, John Calvin would say, “Outside Christ there is nothing worth knowing, and all who by faith perceive what he is like have grasped the whole immensity of heavenly benefits. For this reason, Paul writes . . . ‘I decided to know nothing precious . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified.’”<sup>50</sup> They do not point to principles or maxims but to the concrete deeds of God that reveal his persona.<sup>51</sup>

We do well, then, to ask what the justification of the ungodly tells us about the nature of God. As Jüngel and others have reminded us, the justification of the ungodly is really a statement about the nature and ministry of Jesus. In other words, the *sola fide* is meant to help us appreciate the *solus Christus*. And, if the glory of God is revealed to us in the face of Jesus Christ, then we must press further and say that, somehow, the stunning news that God justifies the ungodly reveals the divine character to us. This ought not surprise us.

48. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo in nativitate Beatae Mariae: de Aqueducto*, ed. J. Leclercq and H. Rochais, *S. Bernardi Opera* 5 (Rome: Cistercienses, 1968), 11.

49. Not only in the Psalms; see also Exod. 6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29–30; 10:2; 14:4, 18; 16:12; Isa. 49:23, 26; 60:16.

50. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.15.2.

51. Similar arguments have been made with compelling force by two recent Jewish theologians: Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Hebrew Bible* (New York: HarperOne, 1987), 39, 40; and Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 113.



Paul tells the Corinthians that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). This surely tells us not only that Christ was God but also that God is Christlike—reconciling, drawing others in, pulling others back, sharing and giving life and grace. But Paul presses still further, employing the language of substitution and justification: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). The precise nature of God’s reconciliation in Christ takes the form of justifying the ungodly. Thus, the Christlike face of God has the texture of justifying grace and the hue of redemptive substitution. Justification runs right back to the character of God, who was in Christ.

The justifying work of the triune God, then, is not accidental or arbitrary. God does not simply happen to go this route or take this course fortuitously. God’s missions express the divine processions. In other words, the course of God’s economy expresses the very character of God.<sup>52</sup> This saving history flows from the divine will, unconditionally; therefore it shows us the very will and way of the sovereign king.

Much contemporary theology has fixed upon the historicist impulse and expressed the link between the divine economy and the divine character in a less nuanced manner. God simply is this history. In chapter 3 we will consider the work of modern-day evangelical historicists—such as Robert Jenson and Bruce McCormack—who suggest that the divine economy constitutes the triune being of God. This approach would surely affirm with us that the economy shows us who God is. This perspective, however, would deny that this God is immutable; indeed, as Jenson puts so powerfully, God’s being is eschatological, attained at the end rather than held at the beginning.

But justification is a *free* expression of the loving God of the gospel. Augustine attempted to note the benefits granted by God’s grace: “If you are without God, you will be less; if you are with God, God will not be greater. He is not made greater by you, but without him you are less.”<sup>53</sup> The great theologian was not intending to deny the reality of God’s gracious presence (being “with God”). No, Augustine has a rich and powerful notion of divine inhabitation, as he confesses: “You were more intimately present to me than my innermost being, and higher than the highest peak of my spirit.”<sup>54</sup> Whether in the

52. See chap. 3 for one such case study. Cf. Gilles Emery, *The Trinity: An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God*, trans. Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 159–94.

53. Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John 1–40*, ed. Allan Fitzgerald, trans. Edmund Hill, Works of St. Augustine 1/12 (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2009), 216.

54. Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Maria Boulding, Works of St. Augustine 1/1 (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1997), 83 (3.6.11).

incarnation of Jesus Christ, the inhabitation of the Spirit, or the presence of Christ in his church, Augustine certainly does not deny the genuine involvement of God himself in his economy. So, yes, the economy reveals God's being. But Augustine also notes that the economy does not constitute God's being. Indeed, Augustine makes much of the doctrine of divine aseity in his reading of John 5:19–30, where we are told that the Son has been granted by his Father to have "life in himself."<sup>55</sup> "What is the meaning of *the Father has life in himself*? He does not have his life elsewhere; he has it in himself. His being alive, in fact, is in him; it is not from outside, it is not foreign to him. He does not as it were borrow life, nor come to life as a participant, in a life which is not what he is himself; but he has life in himself, so that he is himself that life."<sup>56</sup> In his next homily, Augustine puts it bluntly: "Because he has the power from the Father, because he has being from the Father; for the Son, in fact, power is the same as being. That is not how it is with human beings."<sup>57</sup> And later: "As the Father has life in himself, so too he gave the Son the possession of life in himself, so that he does not live as one who participates, but lives without change, and is himself entirely life."<sup>58</sup> Augustine is not downplaying the Son's life, though he is insisting that we see its fullness and the prevenience of God's life in Christ.

In chapter 3 we will consider the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son from the Father. Karl Barth expounds upon its importance: "God would be no less God if he had created no world and no human being. The existence of the world and our own existence are in no sense vital to God, not even as the object of his love. The eternal generation of the Son by the Father tells us first and supremely that God is not at all lonely even without the world and us. His love has its object in himself."<sup>59</sup> The ultimate context for understanding the doctrine of divine aseity is the trinitarian being of God: Father, Son, and Spirit sharing life and love with one another. To go the route of the evangelical historicists is to risk undercutting that triune fullness and thereby mischaracterizing the freedom and gratuity of their engagement of others, suggesting that either divine election (McCormack) or the divine economy (Jenson) constitutes

55. Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, 334–56.

56. *Ibid.*, 343.

57. *Ibid.*, 361.

58. *Ibid.*, 400.

59. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1/1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 139–40. Barth says elsewhere that "God is who He is in the act of His revelation. God seeks and creates fellowship between Himself and us, and therefore He loves us. But He is this loving God without us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the freedom of the Lord, who has His life from Himself" (*Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2/1, *The Doctrine of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957], 257).

God's being. When God makes us, it is not to meet a divine need. When the Lord renews us, this is not a part of a self-fulfillment project.<sup>60</sup> Whether in creation or new creation, the divine economy is gratuitous, precisely because it manifests an already-fulfilled God sharing freely of his fullness.

Nevertheless, emphasis on the aseity and impassibility of God in no way means that we must minimize our affirmation that justification is a free *expression* of the loving God of the gospel. The economy does manifest the divine life for all to see. Perhaps a different facet of the divine economy can be used to highlight the point. Paul tells the Roman Christians that “God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory” (Rom. 9:22–23). God's action—in this case his hardening of Pharaoh and his hating of Esau—“shows his wrath and makes known his power.” God's patience in working out this plan—enduring “with much patience vessels of wrath”—is “in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy.” Nowhere does Paul say that God's mercy and wrath are constituted by these events, but he does emphasize that they are made known through these occurrences.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, then, we see not only God's judgment but also the divine justification of the ungodly as manifesting (not making) the divine character.

Indeed, the justification of the ungodly seems to be right at the heart of God's economy. It was Jesus who said that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). The imagery of ransom speaks of a price paid in order to lawfully assume possession of another person, metaphorical language that funds our theological reflection on justification. We are rightfully God's, according to Mark 10:45, not because we have merited our release and surely not because we have led an effective slave revolt against sin and death. We are free before God and the

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60. McCormack and Jenson both deny that God acts out of need. Yet their programs, I would argue, lead to such a claim, inasmuch as election or eschatology fills out God's being. For a definitive analysis of Jenson's project and an illuminating appraisal of McCormack's project thus far, see Scott R. Swain, *The God of the Gospel: Robert Jenson's Trinitarian Theology*, Strategic Initiatives in Evangelical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013).

61. Wrath and mercy do manifest something eternally true of God in a way not feasibly revealed apart from creation. Here we could note the scholastic language of the *logos incarnandus*, the doctrine that, though the Second Person of the Trinity was not the incarnate Word until the time of his assumption of human flesh (John 1:14), he was always the one who would become incarnate. We dare not downplay the historical manifestation of the divine traits, though we also need not overstep this affirmation of spiritual history by suggesting that it is somehow constitutive of God's very being.

very family of God precisely because a ransom was paid by another: the same Son of Man who “came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). We dare not think about Christ apart from the justification of the ungodly, even as we dare not think of God apart from Christ. As Archbishop Michael Ramsey puts it, “God is Christlike, and there is no unChristlikeness in him.”<sup>62</sup> This being the case, then, we should not think of the triune God apart from the justification of the ungodly.

The good news of the gospel does include this staggering truth: in Jesus Christ we find the true God revealed. So the Puritan divine Richard Sibbes says, “God’s goodness is a communicative, spreading goodness. . . . If God had not a communicative, spreading goodness, he would never have created the world. The Father, Son and Holy Ghost were happy in themselves and enjoyed one another before the world was. But that God delights to communicate and spread his goodness, there had never been a creation nor a redemption. God useth his creatures not for defect of power, that he can do nothing without them, but for the spreading of his goodness. . . . God’s goodness is a spreading, imparting goodness.”<sup>63</sup> The descent of the Son shows the divine determination to be with us—indeed, it shows the generosity of the Trinity.

And the Epistle to the Romans begins with this startling statement: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed” (Rom. 1:16–17). The gospel reveals the just God. There are at least two aspects to this revelation: God’s loving concern to share his life with others, even sinners; and God’s holy passion to do so in a way that does not jettison his righteousness. In Romans 3 Paul will come back to this idea of God’s righteousness when he addresses the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:23–26).

The justifying work of Christ’s redemption is meant to be revelatory. Twice Paul uses the phrase “this [it] was to show” to emphasize that the propitiatory sacrifice of Jesus manifests a profound truth. In both cases we are told that

62. Michael Ramsey, *God, Christ, and the World: A Study in Contemporary Theology* (London: SCM, 1969), 98.

63. Richard Sibbes, *Works of Richard Sibbes* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 4:113.

the sacrifice of Christ reveals the righteousness of God. But what does that mean? Surely the concluding phrase of verse 26 offers commentary: “so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”<sup>64</sup> God’s righteousness here involves his justice and his justification of the ungodly faithful in Christ. In other words, the atoning work of Jesus not only defines the human who is united with him but also reveals the holy God’s love for the ungodly with whom he wills to share his life.

So we see here that God’s wrath and mercy meet. Paul observes that God has been justifying the ungodly, “because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins” (Rom. 3:25). One thinks of David and Abraham, the best of the lot, and remembers that while they were justified, they were also scoundrels who were guilty of murder, mistreatment of women, and the like. Yet God genuinely redeemed them. Paul senses the incoherence and the tension laden in such claims that a holy God declared flawed men and women just. The mystery is resolved when Paul sees the justifying work of Jesus: the holy God does justify the unrighteous by identifying or uniting them to his righteous Son, whom he puts forward as a propitiation for their sins. Only now is God’s holiness and justice manifest along with his grace and mercy. With Paul, John can say that the incarnate Word makes evident the “grace and truth” of God (John 1:14, 17), not merely the mercy of giving life to sinners but also the truth and justice of doing so in accordance with God’s just character.

The justifying work of God does not reveal everything about God—it is not the sole ruler of Christian doctrine. For example, justification itself does not tell us that God’s love of the creature flows forth from eternity past; the doctrine of divine election must be voiced to give confession to this beautiful truth.<sup>65</sup> But the gospel of God’s justifying the ungodly does show the divine character and manifest the divine identity. Indeed, even the doctrine of divine election can be interpreted as an extension of the doctrine of justification into eternity, as Jan Rohls suggests is the case in the theology of some Reformed confessions.<sup>66</sup> Or we could argue the opposite: justification as the extension of

64. We read the *kai* as concessive rather than exegetical, precisely because v. 25 presents a dilemma requiring resolution—namely, the seeming injustice of such liberal forgiveness given in the past. Further, Paul does not seem to make any suggestion that vv. 24–25 are a tradition he will oppose in v. 26. See the argument of Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 240–42; contra Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 91–100.

65. On the notion of “justification from eternity,” see G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, trans. Lewis B. Smedes, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 143–68.

66. Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, trans. John Hoffmeyer, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 148–50.

divine election, the true fount of the Protestant Reformation according to B. B. Warfield.<sup>67</sup> I do not wish to engage either proposal as a historiographic account of the development of Reformational or specifically Reformed theology. In any event, both divine actions flow forth from the gracious divine will and are in no way caused or impelled by a fittingness or merit in the human subject. The doctrines mutually inform one another. They are distinct, yet they are related and interconnected. Election would be quite different if it did not involve objects who were guilty sinners. And justification would look markedly odd if it were a decision of God made only in the midst of history, rather than being rooted in an eternal determination of the divine will. So we see that the justifying God performs all his works in some way that befits his gracious disposition. The Christian understanding of God's character and the works that God does would be misshapen were it not to include and be constantly in touch with his justifying word to the ungodly.

### Justification and Living on Borrowed Breath

Thus far God in the heavens. What then of men and women on the earth? Does the justification of the ungodly speak into this realm of doctrine as well? In *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer offers a way forward: "In Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of this world. The place where the questions about the reality of God and about the reality of the world are answered at the same time is characterized solely by the name: Jesus Christ. God and the world are enclosed in this name. . . . We cannot speak rightly of either God or the world without speaking of Jesus Christ. All concepts of reality that ignore Jesus Christ are abstractions."<sup>68</sup> Here Bonhoeffer reminds us that Jesus Christ not only reveals true divinity to us but also shows us what humanity—"the reality of this world"—is at its most genuine. We now want to go a step further and ask not simply what Christ shows of humanity but also what Christ's justifying the ungodly by faith alone manifests about human beings.

It helps to begin further back and then turn to the justification of the ungodly to see what connections might be drawn in the realm of anthropology. The God who gives life yet again in Jesus Christ is the same God who made the world in the beginning. Amid a world of chaos he brought order. Out of darkness light has shone. The apostle Paul explicitly links creation and new

67. B. B. Warfield, "Predestination in the Reformed Confessions," in *The Works of B. B. Warfield*, vol. 9, *Studies in Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 117–18.

68. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (London: SCM, 1955), 54.

creation in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians: “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:5–6). Writing to the Romans, Paul will also remind them that the God who justified Abraham by faith is the one “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17). Creation and new creation alike are the work of the life-giving God, who creates by his Word and Spirit.

Paul is surely not the first to see such a connection. Indeed, he merely expresses a link deeply rooted in the writings of Israel’s Scriptures—namely, the tie between God’s creative sovereignty and his covenantal grace. Gerhard von Rad addressed the link between the doctrine of creation and God’s redemptive work in the Old Testament, noting that the former is always addressed to instill confidence in the latter.<sup>69</sup> Texts like Isaiah 40 reference God’s creative agency as the backdrop to his restorative promise. “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength” (Isa. 40:28–29).<sup>70</sup> The one who creates is the one who gives strength. The Old Testament prophets and psalms reiterate this time and again: that God gave life to humanity in the beginning (Gen. 2:7) means that we forevermore live on borrowed breath and can always rely confidently on God for that gift.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone only further accents this canonical account of humanity. By insisting that all our life and righteousness is in Christ—indeed, that even our faith is but a mere instrument—justification highlights yet again that we live on borrowed breath.

Dependence is not obvious. Of God it is rightly said, “He alone has of himself all that he has, while other things have nothing of themselves. And other things, having nothing of themselves, have their only reality from him.”<sup>71</sup> For us, life—whether in the beginning or at the end—comes as gift or not at all. Humans do not make themselves, do not sustain themselves, and cannot complete themselves. Even the most basic physical activities of human life—

69. Gerhard von Rad, “The Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation,” in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 131–43.

70. *Ibid.*, 134.

71. Anselm of Canterbury, “On the Fall of the Devil,” I, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 194.



breathing, eating, and drinking—point to our need for ongoing nourishment and sustenance from the outside. The dependent shape of the middle of our history is no different from its beginning and its end. We were made by the will of God, out of nothing and for no merit of our own. We will be completed by this one in Christ, not due to our fitness or worth.

Whether in Adam or in Christ, then, we are creatures: nothing more, nothing less.

To be a creature is to be wholly originated, owing one's being to the loving and purposive divine summons. Unlike the life of the creator, the life of creatures is not *a se* or *in se*. Creatures have being and life by virtue of the freedom and goodness of God whose will it is that their life should be life other than his own perfect life. Because this is so, the manner in which creatures "have" being and life can only be explained by extensive description of the will and work of God. Creatureliness means absolute dependence upon that will and work across the entire span of creaturely being. To be a creature, therefore, is not simply to be a self-standing product of an initial cause; it is to be and to live—without restriction—*ab extra*.<sup>72</sup>

Whether in the breathing of life into the dust of the ground or in the regenerating wind of the gospel summons, human life is grounded outside of itself. Our natural existence is neither initiated nor sustained by our performance, and our participation in God by grace is neither the result of our fastidious obedience nor even the reward of our belief and trust.<sup>73</sup> At every step, God's grace and provision uphold us: "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28); "in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17).

Suggesting links between creation and new creation, of course, does not imply that creation itself involves justification, or even that the relationship between God and humanity in creation is exactly the same as that between God and humanity in Christ Jesus. No, there is surely a movement from creation through fall to reconciliation and redemption. Yet we do find a consistent anthropology presented in the Bible. "One of the definitive features of Christian anthropology is that it declines to define humanity in solely human terms."<sup>74</sup> By the time we come to the apostolic explication of Christ's significance for humanity, we are not at all surprised to find that the just live by faith. Such a christological anthropology is entirely fitting when viewed against the biblical

72. John Webster, "The Dignity of Creatures," in *God without Measure*.

73. The instrumental causality of faith is confessed in the Heidelberg Catechism 61, discussed in chap. 4, n. 45.

74. Anna Williams, *The Divine Sense: The Intellect in Patristic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6.



portrayal of human life and being. “It not only belongs to the nature of the creatures, but constitutes its true honour, not merely occasionally but continuously to need and receive the assistance of God in its existence.”<sup>75</sup>

Thus far we can see that the first article of each creed helps prepare the way for the second: creation shows the shape of human life into which our relation with Christ might fit—namely, dependence for life. Matters, however, might run the other way. Luther shapes his reflection on creation by means of his understanding of justification, as evident in his “Small Catechism.”

I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

What is this? Answer:

I believe that God created me and all that exists, and that he gave me my body and soul, eyes, ears and all my members, my mind and all my abilities. And I believe that God still preserves me by richly and daily providing clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, spouse and children, land, cattle, and all I own, and all I need to keep my body and life. God also preserves me by defending me against all danger, guarding and protecting me from all evil. All this God does only because he is my good and merciful Father in heaven, and not because I have earned or deserved it. For all this I ought to thank and praise, to serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.<sup>76</sup>

Earning and deserving creation and providential care are ruled out. The beginning of life and its ongoing preservation comes “only because he is my good and merciful Father in heaven.” Merit or desert need not be interpreted in a strictly legal sense; they can refer to any need or obligation that one might meet, any demand or command that might be fulfilled. In no way does the creation and sustenance of this world befit its performance. Hence Christians are committed to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* precisely to signal the free work of a God who gives and does not take life.<sup>77</sup> All the way down goes God’s grace. As Bayer says, “Creation and new creation are both categorical gift. The first Word to the human being is a gifting Word: ‘You may freely eat of every tree!’ (Gen. 2:16)—renewed in the gifting Word of the

75. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3/3, *The Doctrine of Creation*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 12.

76. Martin Luther, “Small Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 354–55. For an insightful analysis of this link in Luther’s theology, see Oswald Bayer, “Creation: Establishment and Preservation of Community,” in *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 95–119.

77. On the revolutionary nature of the doctrine of creation from nothing, see Janet Martin Soskice, “Athens and Jerusalem, Alexandria and Edessa: Is There a Metaphysics of Scripture?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 2 (April 2006): 149–62.

Lord's Supper: 'Take and eat. This is my body, given for you!'"<sup>78</sup> The inverse, of course, is that human being is gift all the way down, straight through history. We began with the fruit of the garden; we end with the feast of the city to come; always we are fed by another's generous provision.

As Bonhoeffer suggests, and as we noted above, the person of Jesus Christ reveals true God and true humanity to us. By extension, we have seen that the justification of the ungodly in this same Christ speaks pointedly of God's character as merciful giver and of the shape of human life as radically dependent on life that comes from outside itself. We have been fairly brief in the case of anthropological implications, precisely because the latter chapters of part 3 tease them out more fully, showing links between justification and ethics as well as between justification and ecclesiology. In neither case have we suggested that justification is a sufficient criterion for an appropriate doctrine of God or humanity, though we have seen that it is surely a necessary aspect of both areas for theological reflection.

## Justification and the Architecture of Christian Doctrine

Having seen the interplay between the justification of the ungodly and two crucial doctrines, we are now in a position to appreciate its importance. Recent debates on justification have shown little interest in straining forward to consider the reach of the doctrine.<sup>79</sup> But a doctrine worth such time and effort, such care and concern, surely has much with which to inform the full span of Christian theology. It will not say everything, but it will say something absolutely pivotal to certain things and something related to everything.

In conclusion, then, we can think of justification in terms of architecture. It is surely not the only part of the house, but it does serve as the historical foundation of human fellowship with God in Christ.<sup>80</sup> The architect has sought

78. Bayer, "Creation: Establishment and Preservation of Community," 98–99.

79. One notable exception is Michael Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), which concludes with a chapter relating these soteriological matters to the end of violence. I share Gorman's concern not only to link justification and participation but also to tease out the ethical implications of the former for Christians and Christian communities. However, I have concerns that in both relationships his account tends to confuse the two entities under discussion (justification and participation, justification and human justice). See the discussions in chapters 2 and 5.

80. Of course the eternal foundation would be the gracious will of God, and the economic foundation, ultimately, would be the election of God. With respect to the application of God's blessings in history, however, justification in Christ serves as the foundation of all other blessings. For a helpful account of this foundational role of justification in Calvin's theology, see J. Todd Billings, "John Calvin's Soteriology: On the Multifaceted 'Sum' of the Gospel," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 4 (2009): 428–47, esp. 446–47.

a dwelling place in his people's midst. He envisions and eventually perfects a home, wherein they can feast and delight in his presence. The banquet will surely not occur on a construction site, but in a festive setting. Yet all of this depends on a solid foundation being laid. Justification is that foundation. That God accepts us in Christ as righteous is the basis by which all other blessings can be enjoyed. It is not itself those blessings, just as the concrete foundation is not itself the banquet hall. Yet it remains constantly necessary, lest the party come to a crashing halt. Justification, then, has been and always will remain the root of all other spiritual blessings we have in Jesus.